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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Tom Posey's War

America's defense budget is climbing toward \$300 billion—a lot of money. The purpose of this vast outlay, so we're told, is not just to provide every congressman's district with a military contract, but to carry out America's longstanding policy of containing Soviet aggression.

At the moment the Soviets and their surrogates are endeavoring, with varying degrees of success, to slaughter resisters to Soviet putsches in Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Angola and Central America. In the first three, U.S. help for the resisters is minimal or nonexistent. In Central America, U.S. containment policy is becoming dependent on civilian volunteers—an Alabama fresh-produce dealer named Tom Posey, for example. And now the congressional left wing, having hobbled the U.S. military and CIA, is trying to see what it can do about shackling Tom Posey and his friends as well.

Mr. Posey is a founder of something called Civilian Military Assistance (CMA), started by five Vietnam veterans who never got over the frustration and humiliation they felt when the U.S. containment policy failed in South Vietnam. The vets say they were motivated by the Soviet downing of KAL 007 last year to start CMA with the purpose of helping Nicaragua's "contras" prevent the communists from adding Nicaragua to their list of conquests. CMA says it has sent some \$70,000 in supplies to the contras. Several of its members are working directly with them. That's not much when compared with the estimated \$100 million in arms and supplies the Soviets and their allies poured into Nicaragua last year to help the communist Sandinistas "consolidate" their revolution and wage war on the contras. But it was the best CMA could do.

CMA suddenly became newsworthy and controversial, on Sept. 1 when two of its members were killed in Nicaragua. Dana H. Parker Jr., a Huntsville, Ala., police detective, and James Powell 3rd, a Memphis flying instructor, were in a helicopter shot down by the Sandinista army during what, according to one version, was a contra raid on a Sandinista military school.

Quite predictably, this event brought cries of outrage from the left in Congress, outrage not at the Sandinistas, of course, but at the American volunteers. Maryland Rep. Michael D. Barnes and Tennessee's Sen. James R. Sasser are quoted in the New York Times as taking a dim view of activities such as those of Sen. Sasser's late constituent, Mr. Powell. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence said it would call in government officials for questioning, or, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it, "to find out what the government knew and when it knew it." There was dark talk about violations of the Neutrality Act, which bars U.S. citizens from waging war against a "friendly" regime. Someone even started a rumor that maybe CMA had raided the Huntsville armory of the Alabama National Guard to find weapons to ship to the contras, but a guard audit found that everything was accounted for.

Sure enough, the big firestorm on Capitol Hill forced the State Department to admit that it had indeed been known that there were Americans trying to help Nicaraguans defend their country against communism. And, horror of horrors, the U.S. government did nothing to stop them. Furthermore, the government decided not to try to stop any sovereign nation allies from helping the contras. Finally, this was all decided at a "high level," suggesting that maybe Ronald Reagan himself had been in on the conspiracy to let Tom Posey and his friends raise their \$70,000 to buy beans and bullets.

Now anyone with the nerve to defend Ronald Reagan for allowing this sort of thing to go on might argue that it would be less necessary for the U.S. to depend on Tom Posey for containing the Soviet Union if Congress had given more support for using more conventional methods. It might be argued that when Reps. Barnes and Bolland and like-minded congresspersons rose in high dudgeon over the CIA's mining of Nicaraguan harbors (to try to curb that \$100 million Soviet arms aid effort), their congressional colleagues might have slapped them down; instead, Congress ordered the CIA not to give any more help to the contras. It might even be argued that every time the Russians succeed in undermining another country, they come a little closer to undermining the U.S. But don't expect to impress the congressional left wing.

As it happens, the contras and the Salvadoran army are doing pretty well against the communists without much U.S. help. Afghan and Angolan rebels aren't doing so badly either. Containment, it seems, takes on real meaning when your head is in the noose. But, if Congress doesn't believe U.S. interests are threatened, we wonder what that \$300 billion is for.